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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2006

In Today's Papers

Controversial HAMAS Visit to Ankara

All papers: A surprise visit by Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal to Ankara escalated tensions in Turkey and Israel. There is controversy initiative over whose initiative the visit was, with AKP officials saying Hamas first approached Ankara about the visit and columnists Cengiz Candar and Ibrahim Karagul writing that it was initiated by the Turkish government. The delegation met with AKP officials and Foreign Minister Gul. In a statement, FM Gul noted that the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections was the result of the democratic process and should be respected. Gul added that these are critical times in which the right messages must be conveyed to Hamas. Foreign Ministry officials stressed that the invitation to Hamas was extended by the governing AKP, not the Foreign Ministry. Mashaal was scheduled to meet with PM Erdogan, but following criticism by Israel and several European countries, the Prime Ministry announced that the meeting would not take place. Israel warned that the visit could cause damage to Turkish-Israeli relations that would be difficult to repair. Israeli FM Livni protested the visit, saying that Israel did not need mediators to start talks with Hamas and that talks could start immediately if Hamas gives up terrorism, recognizes Israel, and promises to support the Middle East peace process. The State Department summoned the Turkish Ambassador in Washington to protest the invitation, stating it amounts to meeting with a terrorist leader. Speaking to a group of journalists in Ankara, Ambassador Wilson said: "Our principal concern is that any meeting with Hamas should deliver this same message about abandoning terrorism, recognizing the right of Israel to exist, and adhering to the commitments that the Palestinian Authority has made. Any meeting has to make clear to Hamas that it must take these steps to have international legitimacy."

With the exception of Islamist oriented commentators, editorials did not very welcome the visit and expressed skepticism about the success of AKP government's effort to be a mediator on the Palestine issue. Several writers worried that this "meaningless diplomacy" would harm Turkey.

Calling the Hamas initiative "shortsighted", the editor-in-chief of mass appeal daily Hurriyet Ertugrul Ozkok wrote: "Ankara has taken one of the most pointless and ill-timed steps in diplomatic history. For some reason, Prime Minister and his close aides are very keen to play a mediating role, but they are not thinking it through. They should realize that each pointless diplomatic step they take will make Turkey's role as mediator more difficult than before. And for every such step a price will be paid."

Editor-in-chief Ismet Berkan of the liberal-intellectual Radikal wrote: "Hamas stands at a crucially important juncture concerning its own existence and future destiny. Ankara would be able to accomplish a historic mission if it really could convince Hamas to lay down its weapons. Looking at it honestly, though, I just don't believe that Hamas will accept these conditions and take these steps. I hope I am wrong."

Mainstream daily Sabah carried this commentary by editor-in-chief Fatih Altayli: "Hamas is a terrorist organization that is strengthening its political wing. The western world is approaching Hamas with extreme caution and wants everyone else to do the same. This message was also given to Turkey. The Turkish leadership, however, opted to invite Hamas at this sensitive moment. The Prime Minister, in order not to

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run afoul of his party base, told Hamas that he would meet with them. But then western countries stepped in, and the Prime Minister was forced to cancel. In this way, we threw away the possibility of playing a future role in this issue. Both the West and Hamas have lost confidence in us. Nobody in the AKP can tell me the visit is acceptable because Hamas was elected. What would we think if the PKK were elected tomorrow in northern Iraq, and one of our allies met with them? Let's also remember the Turkish reaction when an elected official who supports the PKK was invited to the United States. If you throw a fit and prevent the Americans from meeting with him, they would naturally see it as their right to do the same. Why wouldn't they?"

Calling the Hamas visit "problematic", senior commentator Okan Gonensin observed in the mass appeal Vatan: "The Middle East issue is a combination of many elements and cannot be reduced to the Palestine-Israeli dispute alone. The Iran crisis, the Iraq occupation, and tension over Syria and Lebanon are all part of the same set of issues, and each particular problem is related to the others. Under these circumstances, mediation is difficult and requires enormous diplomatic skill as well as significant political clout. Any mistake in the process can easily turn one of the parties into an enemy. Leaving aside the question of who took the initiative on the visit of Hamas, the result is a good reminder that this is a difficult and dangerous game."

Drawing parallels between the election victory of Hamas and the existence of the PKK in northern Iraq, Islamist oriented Yeni Safak's columnist Ibrahim Karagul argued: "By putting Hamas on its list of terrorist organizations, the US is trying to create instability in Palestine. Hamas is on the US terrorist list -- but how about the PKK, which is on Turkey's list? The PKK has enjoyed American protection since the occupation of Iraq began in 2003. Turkey's requests regarding the PKK have never been heeded. There is no reason for Hamas to disarm at this time. As the Hamas leader said, the US is trying to disarm Hamas at the same time that Kurdish groups in northern Iraq are provided with more weapons. Apparently both Israel and the US, especially the neo-conservatives, are feeling uneasy about this visit."

The visitors are the new leaders of Palestine, so they had better get used to it."

US Aircraft Carrier 'USS Roosevelt' Anchors in Marmaris
Yeni Safak, Aksam, Vatan, Posta: Returning from its support duties in Iraq, the aircraft carrier 'USS Roosevelt' anchored in Marmaris early Thursday morning. The aircraft carrier has the capacity to carry 87 planes. Reportedly, 5,300 military personnel were on the ship for the last six months and will have four days of liberty in Marmaris. Aksam writes that three hotels in Marmaris were fully booked for the crew and gives the names of the hotels.

US Asks for Turkey's Support on Iran's Nuclear Program
Yeni Safak: US Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Greg Schulte urged Turkey to act together with the international community against Iran. Ambassador Schulte said in a press roundtable yesterday it was important that responsible members of the international community not let Iran divide them. Iran's goal is to produce nuclear weapons. If they succeed, it will pose a threat to Turkey. Increasing diplomatic pressure on Iran will be a long, difficult task. The most important thing is that the international coalition against Iran's development of nuclear weapons hold together.

Secretary Rice Suggests New Unilateral Sanctions Against

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Iran

Hurriyet, Aksam: US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice conveyed the Administration's request to Congress for an additional \$75 million this year to build democracy in Iran. Rice said that "the Iranians are seeking freedom under a radical regime. The funds will be used for radio and satellite television broadcasting and for programs to help Iranians to study abroad."

TV Highlights

CNN Turk (7 a.m.)

? The Hamas delegation's visit to Ankara draws reactions from the EU, US and Israel.

? Ambassador Wilson said the message given to Hamas is important.

? Ambassador Schulte asks for cooperation in diplomatic efforts against Iran's nuclear program.

WILSON